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LAURA LIPPMAN

PONY GIRL

FROM THE SHORT STORY COLLECTION

HARDLY KNEW HER

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PONY GIRL

She was looking for trouble and she was definitely going to find it. What was the girl thinking when she got dressed this morning? When she decided—days, weeks, maybe even months ago—that this was how she wanted to go out on Mardi Gras day? And not just out, but all the way up to the interstate and Ernie K-Doe's, where this kind of costume didn't play. There were skeletons and Mardi Gras Indians and baby dolls, but it wasn't a place where you saw a lot of people going for sexy or clever. That kind of thing was for back in the Quarter, maybe outside Café Brasil. It's hard to find a line to cross on Mardi Gras day, much less cross it, but this girl had gone and done it. In all my years—I was nineteen then, but a hard nineteen—I'd seen only one more disturbing sight on a Mardi Gras day and that was a white boy who took a Magic Marker, a thick one, and stuck it through a piercing in his earlobe. Nothing more to his costume than that, a Magic Marker through his ear,

street clothes, and a wild gaze. Even in the middle of a crowd, people granted him some distance, let me tell you.

The Mardi Gras I'm talking about now, this was three years ago, the year that people were saying that customs mattered, that we had to hold tight to our traditions. Big Chief Tootie Montana was still alive then, and he had called for the skeletons and the baby dolls to make a showing, and there was a pretty good turnout. But it wasn't true old school, with the skeletons going to people's houses and waking up children in their beds, telling them to do their homework and listen to their mamas. Once upon a time, the skeletons were fierce, coming in with old bones from the butcher's shop, shaking the bloody hanks at sleeping children. Man, you do that to one of these kids today, he's as like to come up with a gun, blow the skeleton back into the grave. Legends lose their steam, like everything else. What scared people once won't scare them now.

Back to the girl. Everybody's eyes kept going back to that girl. She was long and slinky, in a champagne-colored body stocking. And if it had been just the body stocking, if she had decided to be Eve to some boy's Adam, glued a few leaves to the right parts, she wouldn't have been so . . . disrupting. Funny how that goes, how pretending to be naked can be less inflaming than dressing up like something that's not supposed to be sexy at all. No, this one, she had a pair of pointy ears high in her blond hair, which was pulled back in a ponytail. She had pale white-and-beige cowboy boots, the daintiest things you ever seen, and—this was what made me fear for her—a real tail of horsehair pinned to the end of her spine, swishing back and forth as she danced. Swish. Swish. Swish. And although she was skinny by my standards, she managed the trick of being skinny with curves, so that tail jutted out just so. Swish. Swish. Swish. I watched her, and I watched all the other men watching her,

and I did not see how anyone could keep her safe if she stayed there, dancing into the night.

Back in school, when they lectured us on the straight and narrow, they told us that rape is a crime of violence. They told us that a woman isn't looking for something just because she goes out in high heels and a halter and a skirt that barely covers her. Or in a champagne-colored body stocking with a tail affixed. They told us that rape has nothing to do with sex. But sitting in Ernie K-Doe's, drinking a Heineken, I couldn't help but wonder if rape started as sex and then moved to violence when sex was denied. *Look at me*, *look at me*, *look at me*, the tail seemed to sing as it twitched back and forth. Yet Pony Girl's downcast eyes, refusing to make eye contact even with her dancing partner, a plump cowgirl in a big red hat, sent a different message. *Don't touch me*, *don't touch me*, *don't touch me*. You do that to a dog with a steak, he bites you, and nobody says that's the dog's fault.

Yeah, I wanted her as much as anyone there. But I feared for her even more than I wanted her, saw where the night was going and wished I could protect her. Where she was from, she was probably used to getting away with such behavior. Maybe she would get away with it here, too, if only because she was such an obvious outsider. Not a capital-T tourist, not some college girl from Tallahassee or Birmingham who had gotten tired of showing her titties on Bourbon Street and needed a new thrill. But a tourist in these parts, the kind of girl who was so full of herself that she thought she always controlled things. She was counting on folks to be rational, which was a pretty big count on Mardi Gras day. People do odd things, especially when they's masked.

I saw a man I knew only as Big Roy cross the threshold. Like most of us, he hadn't bothered with a costume, but he could have

come as a frog without much trouble. He had the face for it—pop eyes, wide, flat mouth. Big Roy was almost as wide as he was tall, but he wasn't fat. I saw him looking at Pony Girl, long and hard, and I decided I had to make my move. At worst, I was out for myself, trying to get close to her. But I was being a gentleman, too, looking out for her. You can be both. I know what was in my heart that day, and while it wasn't all-over pure, it was something better than most men would have offered her.

"Who you s'posed to be?" I asked, after dancing awhile with her and her friend. I made a point of making it a threesome, of joining them, as opposed to trying to separate them from each other. That put them at ease, made them like me.

"A horse," she said. "Duh."

"Just any horse? Or a certain one?"

She smiled. "In fact, I am a particular horse. I'm Misty of Chincoteague."

"Misty of where?"

"It's an island off Virginia," she was shouting in my ear, her breath warm and moist. "There are wild ponies, and every summer, the volunteer firemen herd them together and cross them over to the mainland, where they're auctioned off."

"That where you from?"

"Chincoteague?"

"Virginia."

"My family is from the Eastern Shore of Maryland. But I'm from here. I go to Tulane."

The reference to college should have made me feel a little out of my league, or was supposed to, but somehow it made me feel bolder. "Going to college don't you make you from somewhere, any more than a cat born in an oven can call itself a biscuit."

"I love it here," she said, throwing open her arms. Her breasts

were small, but they were there, round little handfuls. "I'm never going to leave."

"Ernie K-Doe's?" I asked, as if I didn't know what she meant.

"Yes," she said, playing along. "I'm going to live here forever. I'm going to dance until I drop dead, like the girl in the red shoes."

"Red shoes? You wearing cowboy boots."

She and her friend laughed, and I knew it was at my expense, but it wasn't a mean laughter. Not yet. They danced and they danced, and I began to think that she had been telling a literal truth, that she planned to dance until she expired. I offered her cool drinks, beers and sodas, but she shook her head; I asked if she wanted to go for a walk, but she just twirled away from me. To be truthful, she was wearing me out. But I was scared to leave her side because whenever I glanced in the corner, there was Big Roy, his pop eyes fixed on her, almost yellow in the dying light. I may have been a skinny nineteen-year-old in blue jeans and a Sean John T-shirt—this was back when Sean John was at its height—but I was her self-appointed knight. And even though she acted as if she didn't need me, I knew she did.

Eventually she started to tire, fanning her face with her hands, overheated from the dancing and, I think, all those eyes trained on her. That Mardi Gras was cool and overcast, and even with the crush of bodies in Ernie K-Doe's, it wasn't particularly warm. But her cheeks were bright red, rosy, and there were patches of sweat forming on her leotard—two little stripes beneath her barely-there breasts, a dot below her tail and who knows where else.

Was she stupid and innocent, or stupid and knowing? That is, did she realize the effect she was having and think she could control it, or did she honestly not know? In my heart of hearts, I knew she was not an innocent girl, but I wanted to see her that way because that can be excused.

Seeing her steps slow, anticipating that she would need a drink

now, Big Roy pressed up, dancing in a way that only a feared man could get away with, a sad little hopping affair. Not all black men can dance, but the ones who can't usually know better than to try. Yet no one in this crowd would dare make fun of Big Roy, no matter how silly he looked.

Except her. She spun away, made a face at her cowgirl, pressing her lips together as if it was all she could do to keep from laughing. Big Roy's face was stormy. He moved again, placing himself in her path, and she laughed out loud this time. Grabbing her cowgirl's hand, she trotted to the bar and bought her own Heineken.

"Dyke," Big Roy said, his eyes fixed on her tail.

"Yeah," I said, hoping that agreement would calm him, that he would shake off the encounter. Myself, I didn't get that vibe from her at all. She and Cowgirl were tight, but they weren't like that, I didn't think.

When Pony Girl and Cowgirl left the bar, doing a little skipping step, Big Roy wasn't too far behind. So I followed Big Roy as he followed those girls, wandering under the freeway, as if the whole thing were just a party put on for them. These girls were so full of themselves that they didn't even stop and pay respect to the Big Chiefs they passed, just breezed by as if they saw such men every day. The farther they walked, the more I worried. Big Roy was all but stalking them, but they never looked back, never seemed to have noticed. And Big Roy was so fixed on them that I didn't have to worry about him glancing back and seeing me behind him. Even so, I darted from strut to strut, keeping them in my sights. Night was falling.

They reached a car, a pale blue sedan—theirs, I guess—and it was only when I watched them trying to get into it that I began to think that the beers they had drunk had hit them hard and fast. They weren't big girls, after all, and they hadn't eaten anything that I had seen. They giggled and stumbled, Cowgirl dropping her

keys—after all, Pony Girl didn't have no place to keep keys—their movements wavy and slow. The pavement around the car was filthy with litter, but that didn't stop Pony Girl from going down on her knees to look for the keys, sticking her tail high in the air. Even at that moment, I thought she had to know how enticing that tail was, how it called attention to itself.

It was then that Big Roy jumped on her. I don't know what he was thinking. Maybe he assumed Cowgirl would run off, screaming for help—and wouldn't find none for a while, because it took some time for screams to register on Mardi Gras day, to tell the difference between pleasure and fear. Maybe he thought rape could turn to sex, that if he just got started with Pony Girl, she'd like it. Maybe he meant to hurt them both, so it's hard to be sorry for what happened to him. I guess the best answer is that he wasn't thinking. This girl had made him angry, disrespected him, and he wanted some satisfaction for that.

But whatever Big Roy intended, I'm sure it played different in his head from what happened. Cowgirl jumped on his back, riding him, screaming and pulling at his hair. Pony Girl rolled away, bringing up those tiny boots and thrusting them at just the spot, so he was left gasping on all fours. They tell women to go for the eyes if they's fighting, not to count on hitting that sweet spot, but if you can get it, nothing's better. The girls had all the advantage they needed, all they had to do was find those keys and get out of there.

Instead, the girls attacked him again, rushing him, crazy bitches. They didn't know the man they were dealing with, the things he'd done just because he could. Yet Big Roy went down like one of those inflatable clowns you box with, except he never popped back up. He went down and . . . I've never quite figured out what I saw just then, other than blood. Was there a knife? I tell you, I like to think so. If there wasn't a knife, I don't want to contemplate how they did what

they did to Big Roy. Truth be told, I turned my face away after seeing that first spurt of blood geyser into the air, the way they pressed their faces and mouths toward it like greedy children, as if it were a fire hydrant being opened on a hot day. I crouched down and prayed that they wouldn't see me, but I could still hear them. They laughed the whole time, a happy squealing sound. Again, I thought of little kids playing, only this time at a party, whacking at one of those papier-mâché things. A piñata, that's what you call it. They took Big Roy apart as if he were a piñata.

Their laughter and the other sounds died away, and I dared to look again. Chests heaving, they were standing over what looked like a bloody mound of clothes. They looked quite pleased with themselves. To my amazement, Pony Girl peeled her leotard off then and there, so she was wearing nothing but the tights and the boots. She appeared to be about to start on them, when she yelled out, in my direction:

"What are you looking at?"

Behind the highway's strut, praying I couldn't be seen, I didn't say anything.

"Is this what you wanted to see?" She opened her arms a little, did a shimmying dance so her breasts bounced, and Cowgirl laughed. I stayed in my crouch, calculating how hard it would be to get back to where the crowds were, where I would be safe. I could outrun them easy. But if they got in the car and came after me, I wouldn't have much advantage.

The girls waited, as if they expected someone to come out and congratulate them. When I didn't emerge, they went through Big Roy's pockets, took the cash from his wallet. Once the body, if you could call it that, was picked clean of what little it had, Pony Girl popped the trunk of the car. She stripped the rest of the way, so she was briefly naked, a ghostly glow in the twilight. She stuffed her

clothes, even her ears and her tail, in a garbage bag, then slipped on jeans, a T-shirt, and a pair of running shoes. Cowgirl didn't get all the way naked, but she put her red hat in the garbage bag, swapped her full skirt for a pair of shorts. They drove off, but not at all in a hurry. They drove with great deliberation, right over Big Roy's body—and right past me, waving as they went.

I suppose they's smart. I suppose they watch those television shows, know they need to get rid of every little scrap of clothing, that there's no saving anything, not even those pretty boots, if they don't want it to be traced back to them. I suppose they've done this before, or at least had planned it careful-like, given how prepared they were. I think they've done it since then, at least once or twice. At least, I've noticed the little stories in the *Times-Picayune* this year and last—a black man, found dead on Mardi Gras day, pockets turned out. But the newspaper is scanty with the details of how the man got dead. Not shot, they say. A suspicious death, they say. But they don't say whether it was a beating or a cutting or a hot shot or what. Makes me think they don't know how to describe what's happened to these men. Don't know how, or don't feel it would be proper, given that people might be eating while they's reading.

Just like that, it's become another legend, a story that people tell to scare the little ones, like the skeletons showing up at the foot of your bed and saying you have to do your homework and mind your parents. There are these girls, white devils, go dancing on Mardi Gras, looking for black men to rob and kill. The way most people tell the story, the girls go out dressed as demons or witches, but if you think about it, that wouldn't play, would it? A man's not going to follow a demon or a witch into the night. But he might be lured into a dark place by a fairy princess, or a cat—or a Cowgirl and her slinky Pony Girl, with a swatch of horsehair pinned to the tailbone.

About the Author

LAURA LIPPMAN grew up in Baltimore and returned to her hometown to work as a journalist. After writing seven books while still a full-time reporter, she left the Baltimore *Sun* to focus on fiction writing. A *New York Times* bestselling author, she has won multiple awards for her work, including the Edgar, Quill, Nero Wolfe, Anthony, Agatha, Gumshoe, Shamus, and Barry awards.

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